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AUTHOR Chambless, J. R.; Sweeney, M. V.; Thompson, W. D.

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ABSTRACT

The 1998 Mississippi Legislature passed a bill which addressed the state's problem with critical teacher shortages. The Mississippi Teacher Fellowship Program (MTFP), which was developed in response to critical teacher shortages in certain school districts and in certain content areas, grew out of this legislation. The state-based initiative focuses on teacher recruitment and retention in the areas facing shortages. The MTFP uses financial incentives as a means to attract qualified teachers to geographical shortage areas. The incentives include grants and scholarships, loan forgiveness, sponsored employment, and service payback. The MTFP also emphasizes the importance of retaining teachers in these shortage districts by addressing three important issues: keeping contact with new teachers, establishing a network of mentors, and forming a cohort or peer support group for teachers with an emphasis on technology for maintaining contact among teachers. Each year, a cohort of 75 participants are recruited nationally to the MTFP. Participants receive a full-time teacher salary and benefits package. In exchange for a 3-year commitment to teach in a critical shortage area, selected participants receive a host of benefits. (SM)

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The Mississippi Teacher Fellowship Program: A State-Based Initiative for the Recrutiment and Retention of Teachers in Critical Shortage Districts.

J. R. Chambless
M. V. Sweeney
W. D. Thompson

University of Mississippi

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The Mississippi Teacher Fellowship Program: A state-based initiative for the recruitment and retention of teachers in critical shortage districts.

I. **Content**

A. **Statement of the problem:**
As we approach the new millennium, as a nation we face a critical teacher shortage based on both geographical and content-area shortages. The number of qualified teachers continues to decline as more teachers reach retirement and fewer college graduates pursue a career in the teaching profession.

From a local perspective, the magnitude of the teacher shortage in the state of Mississippi is projected to continue to grow. The Public Education Forum of Mississippi conducted a study on teacher shortages in the state that was highlighted in a January 9, 1997 article in The Daily Mississippian. The results of the study showed that the Forum expected the shorten to "worsen" based on the increased standards and requirements for college students, the increased number of teachers in state retiring, and the higher teacher salaries in neighboring states (Holland, January 9, 1997, p. 7).

As recently as May 1999, the Mississippi Department of Education approved five (5) new districts as "critical shortage areas" totaling 43 shortage districts out of 152 districts in Mississippi. The absence of qualified teachers in shortage areas results in lower test scores for the area and overall for the state. Additionally, the lack of qualified teachers in these districts negatively impacts the children and overall work force.

The challenges remain the same from both a local a national perspective. These challenges include the need for attracting qualified teachers to shortage areas, particularly in the areas of mathematics and science, providing ongoing support for new teachers once they are in the classroom, and increasing the retention of teachers in these shortage areas (North Carolina Teaching Fellows Commission Report, 1995, pp. 2-15).

B. **Literature review:**
The relevant literature related to this proposal and presentation fall into three areas: a) teacher shortage, b) recruitment, and c) retention of qualified teachers.

Teacher Shortage
Over a decade ago, David Arfin (1986), in a publication in The Elementary School Journal, acknowledged the future threats of teacher shortage and identified three descriptions of shortage areas which are applicable today: (a) general shortage: shortage in the qualifications of incoming teachers and in the actual number of incoming teachers; (b) geographic maldistribution: "inequities" in the schools, particularly in "inner-city" or "rural areas"; and (c) subject specific: shortages "confined" to specific subject areas such as mathematics, science, and foreign languages (p. 417).

An article printed in the April 1996 issue of The Christian Science Monitor discussed a demographic trend expected to increase teacher shortage in the country. Coinciding with an expansion in the number of students reaching school age, the number of teachers in the nation reaching retirement has also increased. According to the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, in order to

level out this pattern and prevent a major teacher shortage, approximately one million teachers would have to be hired by the year 2001 (L. S. Walters, April 3, 1996, p. 1).

This trend is exceptionally damaging for rural districts which face the difficult task of attracting qualified teachers to their communities and schools often due to lower pay and fewer resources. Furthermore, not only are specific geographic regions directly affected by the teacher shortage, but content specific areas such as mathematics, science, and special education are as well (L. S. Walters, April 3, 1996, p. 18). A national study conducted in 1997 by Linda Darling-Hammond and Deborah Loewenberg Ball also indicated that schools with a large percent of minority students have "less than a 50% change of getting a science or mathematics teacher who holds a license and a degree in the field they teach" (Darling-Hammond & Ball, 1997, p. 6).

The State of Mississippi faces a critical teacher shortage, not only in specific geographic regions but also in specific content areas such as mathematics, science, and special education. The public school districts identified as critical shortage areas are predominantly made-up of minority students, falling in line with the studies formed on a national level.

Recruitment

From a local and national perspective, financial aid incentives remain as a top recruitment tool for attracting teachers into shortage areas. Arfin's (1986) work also highlights four common financial incentives which have the potential to increase interest in teacher preparation programs. These methods include: (a) grants/scholarships, (b) loan forgiveness, (c) sponsored employment, and (d) service payback. Based on his research, Arfin recommends promoting Teacher Corps Fellowships at the state level to recruit talented persons into the teaching profession by using both a service-payback and a sponsored employment program. Additionally, grants/scholarships are more effective when there is an obligation to repay loans if the commitment is not completed (p. 417).

Several examples of state-based initiatives to recruit teachers are shown in Mississippi with the William Winter Teacher Scholar Loan Program and North Carolina with the North Carolina Teaching Fellows program. In both states, financial assistance is given to students enrolled in teacher education programs at a state institution of higher learning at the undergraduate level. Upon graduation, the teacher education majors agree to teach in state for a specified number of years based on the amount of scholarship awarded. (Mississippi Office of State Student Financial Aid, 1996, p. 22; North Carolina Teaching Fellows Commission Report, 1995).

As the need for recruiting qualified teachers continues to grow, the need for retaining these teachers is as equally critical for addressing teacher shortage at both the local and national level.

Retention

The retention of new teachers and particularly teachers in critical shortage areas continues to be an area of concern. Under the North Carolina Teaching Fellows Program, a study was conducted to determine why some graduates were leaving the teaching profession. It was discovered that the preparation and induction of the teachers needed improvement. The Commission listed three areas for improvement of retention as follows: (a) realistic preparation of teachers; (b) better induction and support systems for beginning teachers; and (c) professional working conditions which provide incentives for continual learning (North Carolina Teaching Fellows Commission Report, 1995, p. 21).

A recent study highlighted in the May 1999 issue of Techniques lists three key elements in the retention of new teachers. These areas include: (a) Keeping in touch: Emphasizes "nurturing" of new teachers by regular e-mail contact, list serves of colleagues, and continual contact with advisors; (b) Establish a network of mentors: Facilitate mentoring relationships among new and experienced teachers in their schools; and (c) Help form a peer support group: Establish a peer support group emphasizing electronic discussion groups if distance makes it less feasible to meet in person. (Stewart, 1999 May, p. 21). Additionally, the use of distance learning has been emphasized as a means of making programs more convenient as well as establishing greater partnerships with other institutions.

C. **Contribution:**

In 1998 the Mississippi Legislature passed House Bill 609 which addresses the critical shortage in state, with Section 13 of this bill providing for the University Assisted Teacher Recruitment and Retention Program. As a result of Section 13 of HB 609, the Mississippi Teacher Fellowship Program (MTFP) is designed as an innovative partnership to address Mississippi's teacher shortage.

The purpose of the program is to attract qualified teachers to the critical teacher shortage areas of Mississippi. Scholarships are made available to persons seeking a Master of Education of Educational Specialist degree at a Mississippi institution of higher learning in exchange for employment in these geographical shortage areas. The vision for the Mississippi Teacher Fellowship Program is to provide educational experiences to students enrolled in at-risk schools that will allow these students to participate fully in the economic and social opportunities of our nation.

A cohort group of 75 participants ("Fellows") are recruited nationally each year. Each participant receives a full-time teacher's salary and benefits package through his or her individual school district. In exchange for a three-year commitment to teach in a critical teacher shortage area, selected participants receive the following benefits:

- Tuition scholarship for a Master of Education or Educational Specialist degree program at a Mississippi Institution of Higher Learning
- A Pentium computer
- Professional development opportunities conducted via distance learning on a monthly basis
- Stipends for books and supplies
- MTFP annual Orientation for new Fellows including technology training
- Classroom instructional enhancement grants ($200 during first year of teaching commitment)
- Mentoring Program
- MTFP annual Spring Convocation for Fellows and their Mentor teachers
- Ongoing cohort support via internet chat rooms, daily e-mail, content area resource listings through the MTFP website, and the MTFP Program Office toll-free number

The significance of the Mississippi Teacher Fellowship Program lies in the fact that it is a state-based initiative for addressing teacher shortage, uses financial incentives for the recruitment of teachers nationally, and uses innovative approaches for improving the retention of teachers in shortage districts. Additionally, the MTFP represents a partnership of four major public institutions of higher learning in Mississippi with all other remaining institutions, both private and public, affiliating with the program.

D. **Conclusions:**

The MTFP may be used as a national model for the recruitment and retention of teachers with an emphasis on the first-year induction of teachers through mentoring. As authors Walters (1996, April) and Darling-Hammond & Rustique-Forrester (1997) have noted, the need for teachers continues to grow nationally. The MTFP is placing certified teachers of all content areas, including content shortage areas of mathematics, special education, and science, in Mississippi public schools representing the highest population of minority students.

The MTFP uses financial incentives as a means with recourse to attract qualified teachers, combining sponsored employment and service payback, into geographical shortage districts. Arfin (1986) discusses each of these means as positive tools for recruitment of committed teachers. Additionally, the MTFP emphasizes the importance of retaining teachers in these shortage districts by addressing all three areas recommended by Stewart (1999, May) in terms of keeping in contact with new teachers, establishing a network of mentors, and forming a cohort or peer support group for teachers with an emphasis on technology for maintaining contact among teachers.

In order to address the growing shortage, the Education Commission of the States urges policymakers to take action and make an impact on the "quality of the teaching force" as the increased teacher shortage affects all states. In order to make an impact, policymakers are encouraged to look at redesigning the recruitment, hiring, induction, and evaluation of teachers while also continuing their professional development (Darling-Hammond & Rustique-Forrester, 1997). The Mississippi Legislature through House Bill 609 and the Mississippi Teacher Fellowship Program has taken on that challenge successfully.

Section II. **Outcomes and Methods**

A. **Learner/Participant Outcomes:**

The focus of the symposium will be created around a common theme. The significance of the MTFP program relates to the impact of Mississippi's House Bill 609 as a state-based initiative and the MTFP as a partnership among the institutions of higher learning in the state of Mississippi. As a national model for recruitment and retention of teachers in shortage districts, the participants in the symposium may learn the tools for recruitment nationwide for teachers and the positive effects of mentoring and technology in the retention and induction of new teachers.

Participants may receive further details of the importance of establishing a cohort groups among their teachers, providing distance learning opportunities emphasizing professional development, and using technology to enhance the retention of new teachers in challenging school districts.

B. **Methods:**

The MTFP symposium session will be created around a common theme among other presenters. In addition to answering questions regarding the MTFP program and contributing to the overall common theme of the symposium, literature regarding the MTFP and an annual report, will be available for distribution to participants.

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